

“Liberation Theology”

Valley Presbyterian Church – August 24, 2025

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Galatians 5:1, 13-17

Luke 10:1-11

This is no small operation: Jesus sends his messengers out ahead of him, to all the places he himself would soon go. Not just a few; not just the twelve apostles; he sends out 70 (or even 72), one pair per village. That’s a lot of villages, and a lot of messengers. And yet, he says, the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.

In the previous chapter of Luke, Jesus has already sent out the twelve, providing them with similar instructions – mostly about what not to take. The messengers are given authority over demons and to heal diseases and told by Jesus to stay in the first home they enter – not to couch-surf from house to house – shaking the dust off their feet as they leave.

Here, Jesus sends them to announce peace; and he tells them that – no matter how they are received – they are to say that the Kingdom of God has come near. Peace is the first word they are to give, the opening word, the announcing word; and upon their departure, he tells them, peace will return to them.

It is easy for us to focus on the packing list; Jesus tells them to “carry no bag, no purse, no sandals.” He tells them to travel lightly. Why?

If Jesus is merely telling them to pretend to be poor, this scene sounds like yet another manipulative scheme to fleece the flock. We have all seen enough of such ploys. But notice that his instructions create more than just poverty. The messengers will arrive in each village with sore feet, empty bellies, and no place to stay. They will arrive and find themselves in need of hospitality. Jesus expects that someone will take them in; someone – whether rich or poor – will offer them the gift of hospitality.¹

This model of hospitality turns the common customs as we know and understand them on their head. Where is the notion of reciprocity? If I invite you to dinner, I will surely notice if I do not get an invitation to dine at your home. And what

¹ Richard Swanson from *WorkingPreacher.com*

about overstaying one's welcome? We have unflattering names like "free-loader" for people who would dare take advantage of our generous hospitality.

In the gospels, Jesus dines frequently, but always as the guest. He, himself, never gives a dinner party. Even at the Passover meal at which Jesus presides, someone else prepares it. Here, in today's story, Jesus instructs those sent out to accept the hospitality of any who offer it, and for as long as they offer it, "eating and drinking whatever they provide."

Oscar Romero, Catholic Archbishop in El Salvador, was assassinated while performing a funeral mass for the mother of a family friend on March 24, 1980. As he stood behind the Lord's Table in an open-door sanctuary, a gunman fired a single shot from a passing car, killing Romero instantly.

For years, Romero had been a vocal critic of the violent oppression of the government in El Salvador. His homilies were broadcast weekly over the radio throughout the country. He often preached about the need for all people of goodwill – Catholics, yes, but also Protestants and non-profit organizations, and aid groups throughout Latin America – to act in solidarity with the poor people of El Salvador and stand up against government corruption and military repression.

Romero had become one of the region's most prominent voices for Liberation Theology. He believed that – as with the Hebrew people in ancient Egypt – God had heard the cries of the suffering people in El Salvador for freedom from the bondage of an oppressive regime; and that God would guide them to freedom.

According to Liberation Theologians like Romero, God – in Jesus – showed a preference for the poor. Jesus lived a life of poverty and preached the gospel necessity of justice: healing the sick, feeding the hungry, and sheltering the unhoused. It is, therefore, the role of the church to stand in solidarity with the poor and to respond to the suffering and hope of crucified people. For, if there is no justice, Romero said, then there is no peace.

In a 1977 sermon address, focusing on this passage in Luke 10, Romero said:

(Jesus) summed up his redemptive action with this one word: peace. Today the gospel relates for us the first attempts to evangelize the world. The messengers are not the group of the twelve apostles, whom Jesus is preparing to inspire the whole people of God. Rather, it is a group of seventy-two people in whom I see you, dear sisters and brothers. I see you lay people, you who are baptized,

*mothers and fathers, teachers, professionals, students. You are the seventy-two that Christ chooses and sends out with a mission like the hierarchical mission: "Go out into the world and preach that which sums up my redemption: peace to this household. If peaceful people live there, my peace will remain there. But if people are arrogant or proud, if they reject God, then this peace will not remain there but will return to you. And as a sign of the rejection you have suffered, shake the dust from your sandals before them, as if to tell them that they are not worthy of this message of God. And the peace will go with you, and other people will accept it. But there will always be people who reject it." (Luke 10:5-11).*²

Romero goes on to say:

*Peace is the result of the order that God desires but that we have to work for as the great good of our society. There will be peace only when there is no more repression, when there is no more segregation, when all people can enjoy their legitimate rights, when there is freedom, when there is no fear, when there are no towns smothered in arms, when there are no more dungeons where so many children of God suffer the loss of their freedom, when there is no more torture, when there are no more violations of human rights...(But) justice is not enough; love also is necessary. We have always preached this, sisters and brothers. I am happy to say that all the persons who have examined the church's thought at this time have never heard a word of violence from my lips. We have said that the power of the Christian is love, and we repeat it: the power of the church is love.*³

Romero, representing the Catholic church in El Salvador, tried to engage in dialogue with those who held the political, military, and economic power; to share with them the great capacity for peace that could emerge by following the message of the Gospel; the justice that could roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

This Friday, the City Club of Cleveland hosted Rev. William Barber of *the Poor People's Campaign*, an organization that reimagines the movement for civil rights and economic justice founded by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Not unlike Archbishop Romero, Rev. Barber claims that God holds a preferential place for the

² Oscar Romero, "Peace" July 3, 1977

³ Ibid

poor, and that those who control the levers of political and economic power need to hear the church speaking a Gospel message of love and justice.

As messengers of this gospel, Christians are – today – likewise called to show solidarity with the poor and proclaim the gospel good news of love and justice. Therefore, let's take another look at what Jesus instructs those he sends out ahead of him to do. "Carry no bag, no purse, no sandals," he says. The lack of standard travel equipment indicates their total reliance on the one who sends them. Rather than equipping his followers for some holy war, Jesus instead "de-equips" them so that they can enter the homes and lives of others carrying only peace. He calls on them to listen and discern what it is that people need, instead of first assuming that we must provide them with whatever we have brought.⁴

Might this make us feel a little uncomfortable? Will we feel naked without the safety blankets upon which we often depend? Sure. It could remind us that, as Christ's emissaries, we might be like lambs into the midst of wolves; and of what sometimes happens to saints like Romero (who was officially beatified by Pope Francis in 2015) who dare to speak out. After all, those who have political, military, and economic power typically do not want to share it or give it up. And, those who feel threatened are often prone to lash out against the vulnerable, the poor, and the "other."

And yet, the witness of scripture – both in the Hebrew and New Testaments – tells us that God listens to the cries of those in all kinds of bondage. Our Lord, therefore, calls us to stand side-by-side with the poor and the weak and the oppressed; to elevate their voices and work for justice. For, as the voice of Archbishop Romero still reminds us decades after it was meant to be silenced, the power of the church is love. Amen.

⁴ Mickael Parsons from *WorkingPreacher.com*